The Holy Quran Explained In Clear English

Chapter 1 The Opening (Al Fatiha)

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Scholar Biography

Mohammad Metwali Al Sharawi was born in 1911 to a farming family in a small village in Egypt. He was well learned, and throughout his childhood and adult education he excelled in poetry and literature. His talents did not pass unnoticed by his father who wanted to send him to complete his higher education in Al Azhar, one of the most prestigious Islamic institutes at the time. Mohammad, however, had different plans in mind. He wanted to stay and help his family farm the land. Sensing his child’s potential, the father kept the pressure on. In an attempt to change his father’s mind, Mohammad asked him to buy all the major references in literature, culture, Arabic language, and Islamic studies. These were valuable books, and not cheap by any means. Despite the financial burden, his father came through, and bought him all the books he asked for knowing well that they were not part of Al Azhar's curriculum.

Mohamed excelled in his studies, and read far beyond what was asked of him. He enjoyed the Arabic language, poetry, and was well known for his ability to express his ideas in a clear and simple manner.

He graduated in 1943 and held several teaching jobs until he moved to Saudi Arabia in 1950 to work as a professor of religious studies in the university of Mecca. In 1963 he moved back to Egypt and held a high position at the Al Azhar. And in November of 1976 he was appointed by the Egyptian prime minister to head the ministry of religious affairs. One of his first achievements as a government minister was to establish the first Islamic bank in Egypt.

Throughout his life Al-Sherawi was recognized with several awards including the presidential medal and two honorary Ph.D.s from top universities.

Perhaps his greatest work and most recognizable achievement was a televised Series called "Reflections upon the Quran" . The television show started to air in 1980 with the first few episodes covering his vision and method in explaining the Quran. This was followed by his reflections upon each verse of the Quran starting from the very first chapter. His TV

appearance spanned over 10 years and covered more than two thirds of the Quran. His death however, prevented him from completing the entire text.

Al-Sherawi's method in explaining and reflecting upon the Quran depended on several sources. First, he relied on his thorough knowledge of the Arabic language and its intricacies. Second, He drew on his comprehensive knowledge of the entire text of the Quran, and third he focused on the social applications and everyday life lessons of the holy text. He also took special care to answer those who attacked or attempted to discredit verses of the Quran.

His ability to use clear and simple examples and to illustrate deep philosophical issues in an easy to understand manner helped him reach vast audiences of different social and educational backgrounds. His TV series reruns on many television channels to this day. It is this ability to reach the masses over decades is what we will try to tap into.

Al-Sherawi passed away in the summer of 1998. His funeral was broadcast live and attended by tens of thousands of admirers.

This work is a direct adaptation of his TV series. For our purposes, many English translations of the meaning of the Quran were considered. While no single translation can capture the true essence and beauty of the Quran, we found that more can be gained, and less will be lost, by looking at multiple translations simultaneously.

Chapter 1 The Opening (Al Fatiha)

Verse One

"In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent".

The Quran, from the moment it was revealed and through its first words, was attached to the name of God. The first words of revelation to Prophet Muhammad were **"Read in the name of your Lord who created" (Chapter 96: Verse 01.)** Just as the Quran began its universal mission 'in the name of God', we should also begin the recital of the Quran in the same way.

The Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him was in the cave of Heraa when Gabriel, the angel who was responsible for delivering the Quran, came to him for their first meeting.

The first word of God: (**Read**!).

The command 'read' requires the person to have either memorized something, or to have something written in front of him. But the Prophet at the time had neither; and Even if he had a book before him, it would have been pointless, since he could not read or write.

When Gabriel delivered God's command: 'read', the Prophet -being aware of his capabilities- replied : "I cannot read". Gabriel repeated to the messenger: 'read', but the Prophet replied every time "I cannot read". The opponents of Islam picked out this point to question: how is it

possible when God -the all capable- commands His unlearned messenger to 'read' and then the prophet replies with "I cannot read"? Isn't God's command and wish always enforced through His powers that say to an object be and it becomes?

We reply that God communicated, through His powers that say to an object be and it becomes, while the Prophet communicated back through his human nature which said that he is unable to read even one word. However, it is the God's power, through this heavenly message, that would transform this illiterate man into teacher for entire mankind until the Day of Resurrection. And while every person learns from another human being, Muhammad (peace be upon him) was taught by God. He became a teacher for the greatest scholars of mankind who took knowledge and wisdom from him. So when the prophet said "I cannot read", the answer came from God in very next verse:

Read: In the Name of your Lord who created, created Man of a blood-clot (96:1,2)

Meaning that God who created from nothing will make you, Muhammad, read and deliver to people a message, the likes of which the civilizations of the world will fail to produce until the Day of Judgment. God Almighty continued:

Read, for your Lord is most generous, Who taught by the pen (96:3,4)

Note that God in this verse used the formula of emphasis "Most Generous". When you are taught by a person, then it is through the mere generosity of God because He made it possible for you to learn from your equal. But if God himself is the one who is teaching you, then He is 'the Most Generous' because He has elevated you Muhammad to the highest level.

God wants us to know that the prophet (peace be upon him) does not recite the Quran because he had learned reading, rather he recites it in the name of God. And as long as he recites in the name of God, then it does not matter whether he was educated by a man or not, as God has taught him above the standards of entire mankind.

Likewise, we should begin reading the Quran with the name of God, because He is the one who made it easy for us in revelation, and recital. He says:

Say, 'If God had so willed, I would not have recited it to you, nor

would He have made it known to you. I lived a whole lifetime among you before it came to me. How can you not use your reason?' (10:16)

Here you may wonder: Is the recital of the Quran the only task we are required to begin with God's name? The fact is that we are asked to begin every act in the name of God. We must honor his favors and bounties upon us in this universe. For example, when we farm the land, we should begin in the name of God because we did not create the land that we cultivate, or the seed that we sow, nor have we poured down rain for the plants to grow. In fact, the farmer who plows and plants can be completely ignorant about the composition of the soil, the substances within each seed, and the effect of water on their interaction. Our limited role in this scenario is to our intellect and capabilities -which are created by God- to work the substances that are also created by God until the plants grow. We have no power to coerce the earth to yield crops. It is beyond our capability to create a single seed or bring down rain. Hence, when you begin your work with the name of God, you acknowledge that He is the one who has subjected the earth, seed and water for you. In essence, you are declaring that these elements function in the name of their creator.

God has subjected the entire universe for our benefit. Sadly, we are often under the misconception that we have power or true autonomy in this world. Moreover, and due to the reliability and monotony by which everything functions for us, we fall under the false impression that the physical laws of cause and effect, action and reaction are naturally inherent, and independent of their Creator. However, the truth is that it is the will of God that allows these laws to function, and if He wills, He stops them. For example, a domesticated camel or an enormous elephant can be led by a child. But even a strong man cannot domesticate a small snake. If taming an animal was done through our own powers -such as our physical and intellectual advantages- then we should easily be able to domesticate a small snake or an insect. God wanted to present us these animals as proof so we realize that He has subjugated what He willed, and He did not subjugate what He did not will as stated in this verse:

Do they not see the cattle among things We have fashioned by Our power, which they own, Whom We made subservient to them so that some of them they ride and some they eat? (36:71,72)

Now, you can appreciate that the submissiveness of livestock is through their subjugation by God, not through our abilities.

Let's look at another example. While scientists explain how clouds form

and rain falls through the laws of physics in the atmosphere, God Almighty wants to draw our attention towards a higher power. When there are droughts, we should realize that this is not only happening through the procedures of the universe, but also through the will of the Creator. If the universe functioned exclusively according to its procedures, then what makes them ineffective at times? Conditions may be perfect for rain, and the forecast may call for plenty, yet no rain comes. It is the will of God that is above the laws of the universe. Therefore, everything in the world is in his name. He is the one who gives and withholds even in the matters in which we have been given some freedom of choice as stated in the following verse:

To God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth. He creates whatsoever He wills, bestows daughters on whosoever He will, and gives sons to whom He choose.On some He bestows both sons and daughters, and some He leaves barren. He is all-knowing and all-powerful. (42:49,50)

This last example comes from within ourselves. A perfectly healthy married couple may not conceive children despite continually trying. This man and woman may have all the required health attributes to conceive, and all the physical conditions have been met for pregnancy. However, conditions do not create a human being, God does. If He wills he allows the laws to function and if He wills He stops their function. The lesson to take is, while we live our lives through causes and effects, and the laws of the universe, we should always keep in mind that these laws do not govern God, rather it is Him who creates and governs them at all time. Hence, everything and every action should begin with God's name.

God Almighty -the creator of the universe- can make the laws of the universe function and cease to function. He is also able to go beyond the laws. Take, for example, the story of Prophet Zechariah (peace be upon him) who was responsible for providing for Virgin Mary. He used to bring her all her daily needs as she secluded for worship. One day, when he walked into her room, he was surprised to find food he did not bring, nor seen the likes of before.

Naturally, he questioned Mary the sainted worshiper who had never departed her chamber as mentioned in the following verse:

"Where has this come from, O Mary?" (Chapter 3: Verse 37)

This scenario presents us with two important lessons, first , and as you will see later from Virgin Mary's answer, God can overrule the laws of cause and effect and provide from nothing. Second, we should learn from Prophet Zechariah to always be watchful and proactive when we see signs of possible corruption in our surroundings. It is the lack of vigilance in enquiring about suspicious matters, especially those regarding sudden and unexplained wealth, that lead to corruption. As a society, we recognize possessions that are not in line with the capabilities of the person who attains them. For example, a wife sees her husband spending more than his salary, or sees her daughter wearing something that exceeds her income; if the mother questions her family about how they obtained these goods, then there would be no corruption in society. Corruption spreads when we shut our eyes from seeing illegal acts and unlawful wealth. Prophet Zechariah, while having no doubt about Mary's piety and character, still exercised vigilance and asked her "Where did you get this from?" Her reply came in the following verse:

and she said, 'They are from God: God provides limitlessly for whoever He will.'(3:37)

Mary pointed out that it was God who provided for her, highlighting the fact that the laws of cause and effect do not govern his freedom and authority. She drew Zechariah's attention towards the limitlessness of God's power. At that moment, Zechariah supplicated his Lord regarding an issue where only this freedom from all physical laws could intercede. He wanted a child while he was an aged man and so was his wife, aged and barren. Reproduction is only effective at a young age of fertile couples. So when both the male and the female reach old age they cannot reproduce. And let's not forget the fact that Prophet Zechariah's wife was infertile and could not bear children even when she was young. This matter is against the laws that govern humans, even by today's modern medical standards. But it is God alone who is capable in going beyond any set laws. When Prophet Zechariah supplicated, with certainty in his heart that all things are possible, God granted him a son named "John".

So everything in this world begins with the name of God, and concludes with His name. Yes, the universe is managed by a set of laws, but God's will is above all.

When you begin all your affairs with God's name, it is as though you have chosen God to be on your side supporting you. Any action you take requires many qualities. For example, when you start a physical activity, such as running, you require eyesight, physical health, and strength. Thus, if God Almighty had not informed us of the all-inclusive name for

all his attributes, you would have needed to specify the help that you required. You would have needed to say 'in the name of the All-Powerful, in the name of the Sustainer, in the name of the Responder to prayers, in the name of the Creator' and so on. But God taught us his name that is inclusive of all of attributes of perfection: This name is "Allah". Now you can begin all of our actions with "in the name of Allah"

Sadly, those who do not begin their actions with the name of God, only seek materialistic or worldly compensation. A true believer, on the other hand, has higher aspirations and begins all his or her actions with God in mind. Each earns from this world based on his or her knowledge and effort, because God is the sustainer of everyone regardless of their faith. But this is not the true lasting life for man, rather it is the hereafter. The person who has the world in his mind limits his or her reward to this world; and the one who keeps God in mind gets the reward in this world and a far greater and everlasting return in the hereafter. God the Almighty says:

Praise be to God, to whom belongs all that is in the heavens and earth, and praise be to Him in the life to come. He is the All Wise, the All Aware. (34:1)

The believer praises God for His bounties in this world, and then praises him in the hereafter when God saves him from hellfire and admits him into paradise.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) was quoted saying:

"Any important work that does not begin with the name of God is flawed."

When you start an action without God in mind, you are under the false impression that it is you who subjected your surroundings to serve and respond to your will. More importantly, it is as though you have decided to forgo your reward in the hereafter and settle for a much lower compensation limited to this world. So if you desire the bounty of this world and the reward of the hereafter for everything that you do, then approach each and every task with God's name. Before you begin eating, start with the name of God because He created this food and provided for you. When you enter the examination hall say: 'in the name of Allah', and he will help you towards success. When you marry say 'in the name of Allah', because He has created your spouse for you and made him or her lawful.

Perhaps most importantly, when you begin every action with God's name, it will prevent you from doing any deed that displeases Him. You cannot begin a task that will bring God's displeasure when you start with His name. If you intend to commit theft or drink alcohol, and then you start with God's name, you will surely abstain from it. You will feel ashamed of beginning a deed that angers God in His name. Therefore, all your actions will be according to what God has made lawful.

When you begin reciting the Quran with God's name, it is a pledge that you will follow what He has ordered, abstain from what he has prohibited, and respect all that you read in this book. It is he who gives life and death and to Him belongs the authority in this world and in the hereafter. Before whom you will stand on the Day of Resurrection when He will call you to account for your good deeds and for your transgressions.

You may question, how then can you begin reciting with the name of God, while you have at one time or another disobeyed and opposed Him? The answer is simple, God is the one who taught us how to approach the recitation of the Quran with His name, and more importantly, to start with the "The Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent". God does not desert the disobedient; rather He opens the doors of repentance for him or her, and forgives all sin because he is the Most Merciful. God is constantly calling every disobedient person to return to the enclosure of faith. So begin reading the Quran with the name of God the Most Merciful the Most Benevolent because his mercy forgives all sin big and small, near and far.

The Arabic words الرحمة'mercy' , الرحمن 'the Most Merciful' and الرحيم 'the Most Benevolent' all share the same root رحمwhich means 'the womb'. The womb is the place where nourishment and protection are provided for the fetus with abundance. In the womb, the fetus finds everything his or her development requires from God without any work or effort. This mercy extends beyond the womb; Think about the overwhelming love a mother has for her child, her warm-heartedness towards him or her, and her concern for the baby even while still in the womb.

God Almighty mentions in a Sacred Narration: *'I am the All-merciful. I created the womb and gave it a name* الرحم*derived from My own name* الرحمن*,So whoever maintains ties with his womb and kin, I shall maintain ties with him; and whoever severs ties with his family I shall sever ties with him.*

God wants us to always be mindful of his kindness as he provides for us and opens wide the doors of repentance time after time. He does not punish or deprive us from His favors, and he does not destroy us despite the fact that we continually commit sin. He wants us to begin the recital of the Holy Quran with his names "the Most Merciful the Most Benevolent", so that we may remember the open doors of mercy. Whenever you distance yourself from the right path, God longs for your return. So raise your hands to the heavens and say 'Our Lord! Through your mercy forgive my sins and wrongful deeds'; This way, you always remain connected with your creator. As long as God is the Most Merciful the Most Benevolent, the doors of mercy will never close before you.

In the Arabic language: 'راحم' Rahem means the merciful,*'Rahmaan '*meansthe Most Merciful and *'Raheem'* the Most Benevolent. So God chose to use the words “Most Merciful” and “Most Benevolent” in the hyperbole form indicating the vastness of his Mercy. Always keep in mind that God's attributes do not change or oscillate between strength and weakness. Rather these are attributes of absolute perfection at all time. The only change is to whom these attributes apply. Let’s examine this concept in two examples from the Quran. God says:

God does not wrong any one, not even the equal of an atom (chapter 4: verse 40)

This verse negated all unjustness from God; and then we encounter the following verse:

and your Lord is not tyrannical to the slaves (03:182)

In this verse, we notice the use of the word “tyranny”, which means extreme unjustness. So, at first glance, this verse does not negate God being unjust; it only negates him being extremely unjust; so there seems to be a contradiction between the two verses. However, when you take a closer look at the intricacies of the language, you will find the answer. The first verse negates all unjustness from God with regard to a single being. The second verse did not mention unjustness in regard to a single person; rather it mentioned the plural word 'slaves', meaning all of God's creation. Given the enormous number of God's creation, if each person is inflicted even with an atom's weight of unjustness, the total unjustness would be massive, and this adds up to tyranny. Thus, both verses negate all unjustness from God, but the expression of hyperbole “tyranny” is used for the large number of people to whom the verse applies. God does not treat anyone unjustly; his fairness, just like his mercy, is absolute and consistent.

This brings us back to the words “Most Merciful” and “Most Benevolent”. God is the Most Merciful in this world because of the large number of those whom he includes under His mercy. God's Mercy envelops all -the believer, the disobedient and the disbeliever-. He provides everyone with the essentials of life, and pardons many regardless of their faith or disbelief. On the other hand, in the hereafter, God will extend His mercy only to the believers while the rest will be expelled from it. Here you may ask: Why do we still use the form of hyperbole “the most benevolent” when God’s mercy in the hereafter is only limited to the believers? We answer; God's mercy in this world is general and widespread to all his creation. And while his mercy is specific for the believers in the hereafter, it is far greater in its quantity and everlastingness.

A number of scholars have differed whether the verse **'In the name of God the Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent'** is a part of the Quran chapters or not. Is it the first verse of every chapter? or is it just a separator between chapters? The scholars are of the opinion that ‘**In the name of God the Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent'** is a verse from amongst the other verses of the Quran, but it is only considered an) 'the opening of الفاتحةintegral part of the very first chapter of the Quran (the book'.

It is also worth noting that this verse occurs at the beginning of 113 chapters of the Holy Quran's 114 chapters. All chapters of the Quran begin with it except for Chapter 9 (The Repentance). And it has been repeated in chapter 27 (The Ants) twice, once at the beginning of the Chapter and once in the following verse:

It is from Solomon, and it says: in the name of God, Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent' (27:30)

Verses 2 and 3

All praise is due to God, Lord of the worlds;

the Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent.

When reading these verses, we immediately note that three of God’s names are mentioned and repeated in the first three verses of "The Opening" chapter. The names: God "Allah", 'the Most Merciful' الرحمنand 'the Most Benevolent' الرحيم are mentioned in the first verse, and then repeated in the second and third. Keep in mind that since the Quran is God's word, there is no pointless repetition in its words, and when a word is repeated, it serves a specific purpose each time. God employs every word in its proper place to carry a precise meaning. Let's look at the indication of God’s names in these verses:

The phrase of the first verse: 'in the name of God' is an expression for asking for God’s help when we begin an act. We are requesting support from God who subjected the universe for our service. But when, in the second verse, we say: 'All praise is due to God' it expresses our gratitude to him for what He has done for us. As we mentioned previously, when we seek assistance or express gratitude to God, we use the name "Allah" because it is all-inclusive of his attributes. More specifically, there is no need to say: all praise is due to the Sustainer, all praise is due to the All-Giver, all praise is due to the Most Merciful and so on. 'In the name of Allah' in the first verse is a request for help from God with all the perfection of His attributes. And 'all praise is due to Allah' in the secondis showing gratitude to God with all the perfection of His attributes.

Similarly, ′ the Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent'in first verse,and then in the third, both indicate a different meaning. Let's take them one by one:

The firstverse reminds us of God's mercy and forgiveness so we do not shy away from seeking his assistance if we have committed sin. God wants us to seek him in all our actions, and wants us to know that his doors of compassion and mercy are wide open. We always want to seek refuge in God and appeal to his mercy, not His justness, because God's justness does not spare sin big or small, while his mercy pardons all. As stated in the following verse:

The Book will be set in place and you will see the evildoers fearful of what is in it. They will say, ‘Alas for us! What is this Book which does not pass over any action, small or great, without recording it?’

They will find there everything they did and your Lord will not wrong anyone at all. (Chapter 18: Verse 49)

And if God's mercy did not prevail over His justness, then we would have all perished for our sins as stated in this verse**:**

If God took people to task for the evil they do, He would not leave one living creature on earth, but He reprieves them until an appointed time: when their time comes they cannot delay it for a moment nor can they bring it forward.(16:61)

It is narrated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "None of you will enter Paradise by his deeds alone unless God showers you with Mercy." The companions asked, "Not even you, Messenger of God?" He replied, "Not even me."

And in another narration, the prophet said *"All children of Adam*make *mistakes,*and the best of those who make *mistakes*are thosewho repent." We are often weak and impatient, and we commit sins to different degrees. When wejudge, we may treat unjustly; when we assume, we often think ill; and when we speak, we lie or backbite. None of us can claim perfection, even those of us who spare no efforts in mindfulness. Perfection is the attribute of God alone. God Almighty says:

He has granted you from all that you ask Him. Were you to attempt to count God's blessings, you could not compute them. But for sure humankind are much prone to wrongdoing and to ingratitude.(14:34)

However, God did not want sin to prevent us from carrying on with our life in His name. Thus, He taught us in the very first verse of the Quran to say: (in the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent) so that we remember that the door is always open for seeking his help.

), 'the Most Merciful' and 'the Most الفاتحةIn the third verse of (Benevolent' follow the phrase 'Lord of the Worlds' meaning the One who created us from nonexistence and provided us with countless bounties. God is the Lord of the believer and the disbeliever alike. He created and brought both to existence. Thus, he grants sustenance and bounties to all. The sun rises on the believer and the disbeliever alike. Rain falls on those who worship God and those who worship idols. These bounties, and countless more, are from the grants of Lordship. They are for all God's creation in this world, and within lays immense mercy. Hence, 'the Most Merciful and the Most Benevolent' in the third verse imply God's mercy in His Lordship towards all creations. We

praise God for these bounties which we all enjoy through His mercy and His lordship.

It is through God's mercy that He has made it effortless for us to pay him " 'All praise is due to God'. الحمد لله gratitude with two simple words: " Think about when you want to show sincere appreciation to a person for a favor that he or she has done for you. You may spend hours preparing the words of praise. You edit, omit a word here, add one there, and consult others until you finally prepare a letter or speech expressing your gratitude.

If you take a moment to think about God's favors, you will quickly realize that they cannot be counted or comprehended. So no matter how much eloquence any person may have, he or she cannot compile expressions of praise that befit God's grandeur and bounties. Then how can we praise him while we cannot count His favors, or encompass His mercy? The Messenger (peace be upon him) portrayed this picture for us in this statement: *'Dear lord, I am unable to find sufficient words of praise that befit You. All I can say is: You are as You have praised Yourself.'* Therefore, one of God's greatest bounties is that He taught us to express our gratitude to Him in these simple words: (All praise is due ". And by specifying these words, God made it equal الحمد لله to God) " for all human beings; otherwise, the degree of praise among people would differ based on their abilities. For instance, an illiterate person who cannot read or write would be unable to find proper words to praise God. A scholar of literature, on the other hand, would express his or her gratitude with eloquence. But God's fairness granted all of us this equal expression; and he placed these words in the first few verses of the first chapter of the Quran. Now, the learned, the illiterate, the eloquent and the one with speaking disability can be equal in expressing their gratitude. We thank God Almighty for all He has taught us and we remain in his praise at all times.

As a rule, exaggeration in praise and show of gratitude to a person or a group of people is discouraged as it may lead that person or group towards arrogance, hypocrisy and transgression. When we put in perspective that we thank God for all His great bounties with only two ", then it is only natural that we lessen and balance our الحمد لله words " praise to other human beings.

God created heaven and earth, air and water and all life's necessities before he created us. He deposited sustenance for life in earth until the

Day of Resurrection. All these bounties were already here to welcome and cradle man when he was created; and this merits our gratefulness. Likewise, God created paradise before He created Adam (peace be upon him) so that Adam may not be fatigued or miserable. He immediately found food, drink, life's necessities and enjoyment. And when Adam and Eve descended to earth, the bounties had already preceded them. They found food, drink and the necessities of life. If these bounties did not exist, but were created -even shortly- afterwards, then man would have suffered and may have perished while waiting for them.

The divine grant has also cradled us as soon as each one of us was created. The fetus finds a womb prepared for his reception and sustenance and exceeding his needs for the duration of the pregnancy. At the time of birth, God places milk in the breast of the mother which emerges at the time of hunger and ceases when the baby had his fill, and then stops completely when the period of suckling is over. He finds parents who provide for him until he is able to self-sustain. All this happens before a person reaches the age of duty and obligation, and before he has the ability to say the phrase: (all praise is due to God). As you see, the blessings always precede and welcome the one who is blessed. Therefore, we must always express gratitude for all God's bounties.

There are countless things that we are unable provide for ourselves without God's blessings. The sun extends us life and warmth without any effort or work on our part. Rain comes down, and water springs out of the ground for our benefit. God provided us with night and day so we can sleep, rest and then strive for a better life. We did not create any of these bounties that are constantly at our service. Then isn't it befitting that we say "الحمد لله "for preparing and subjecting the universe for our comfort? Rather, it obligates praise.

All life on earth and all the signs that God placed in the universe are here to point out to us that there is a greater power. The sun, moon, stars, and earth transcend our capabilities. All around us, crops grow from the ground, and despite being grown in one soil and watered by the same water, each has its own color, shape, smell and taste that differs from the next. All these signs, ever changing and moving right before our eyes, invite us towards their study and provide us with proof of the existence of an innovative creator. Despite all the recent advances in our knowledge in all sciences, no one can claim that he or she has created the sun or gave the earth its soil or atmosphere. No one can claim to have created him or herself or anyone else. And since no one person, and no

group, is able to claim to be the creator of the universe, the matter is settled by default to the one who has claimed it and provided proof: God Almighty. All praise be to Him because He has instilled within us our inquisitive nature, and then supported it with rational intellectual evidence through His signs in the universe.

Despite all this, we tend to praise the creation and forget the Creator! When, for example, you see a beautiful flower or an attractive gem, you say: “what a beautiful flower”; “what a fabulous gem”. But the object that you just praised did not grant itself beauty. The gem has no power in the fine arrangement of its crystals. It is God who has instilled order and beauty in everything. So let's give credit where credit is due and say " الحمد لله " who created in this world that which reminds us his greatness.

Now, let's take a look at another key bounty that obliges our gratitude: The bounty of God’s message to humanity. This message, delivered through the prophets, taught us that it is Him, the Almighty, who created. The beauty, grandeur, and precisionof creation indicated to the thoughtful mind that there is a greater power, but left the mind unable to say who that power is or what the creator might want from us. This is why God sent His messengers. They helped explain that the creator is Allah and helped us bridge the gap where our intellect had reached its limit in inquiring about the creator. This bounty certainly merits our deepest gratitude and praise.

Furthermore, God's messages helped legislate and guard our way of life. It showed us the right path and how to distance ourselves from corruption. As we look around, we find injustice in every human made system. In communist countries, power and luxury are the monopoly of their respective central committees. While the entire people lead a miserable deprived life. Such is the case in capitalist systems, where capitalists exploit resources, reap the benefits and try to give the bare minimum to others. God, on the other hand, does not differentiate or discriminate against any of us, and he does not prefer anyone over the other except by our piety and good deeds. He taught us that the proper way of life rests in constraining our desires in exchange for justice in this world and immense reward in the hereafter. The laws set by people are based on self interest, and throughout time, people exploited each other because they wanted what others had, whether it was wealth, treasure, or natural resources. God, on the other hand, does not need anything that we possess. To Him belong the depositories of everything as He states in this verse:

And there is not a thing but We have the vast treasures of it; and We

do not send it down but according to a proper and prescribed measure. (Chapter 15, Verse 21)

Hence, servitude to God always grants you and does not take from you.

More importantly, God loves when you ask from His bounties, and seek his help. Through this, He guards you from humiliation and exploitation in this world. Let look at an example form daily life, if you have a need from your boss or a person in authority, he or she, after many requests, may grant you an appointment of a specific duration. During your meeting, he or she may feel irritated by your presence or your needs and hastens to stand up to end the meeting. God's door, on the other hand, is always open. You can stand before Him in prayer whenever you desire. Raise your hands in supplication any time you like, and ask whatever you wish for God grants you what you want if it is in your best interest. And He withholds from you when it is to your detriment. God wants you to always seek him as He says in the following verse:

Your Lord says, 'Call on Me and I will answer you; those who are too proud to serve Me will enter Hell humiliated.(40:60)

and in another verse:

When My servants ask you about Me, I am indeed nearmost. I answer the supplicant's call when he calls Me. So let them respond to Me, and let them have faith in Me, so that they may fare rightly. (2:186)

God knows what you conceal within yourself, so he repeatedly gives you without asking. His grants and favors upon us warrant praise and their withholding from us also warrant praise. God relates in a Sacred Narration: *"Whoever is too preoccupied by My remembrance to ask my favors, I shall give him the best I give those who ask"*.

God's blessings never cease and His treasures never run out. Every time you ask from Him He has more and more to offer. A poet once wrote:

It is sufficient pride for me that I am a servant who is

welcomed to be before my Lord without an appointment

Although He is in His divine sanctuary,

I can meet Him whenever and wherever I wish

This beautiful phrase " الحمد لله " is not mere words that you say and repeat; rather, as you praise God, the true emotion of gratitude for his blessings should envelope your heart. This appreciation shines through and overflows to the entire world around you. It is what compels you to stand in prayer before God as you feel one with the universe.

We have all experienced this to some degree in our lives… Suppose that you were stricken by a crisis, or you fall into great distress. Then a true friend comes along to help you out, be by your side and relieve you from your troubles. At first you acknowledge this favor and say to yourself "this person deserves my deep gratitude". As the feelings of love and appreciation fill your heart, they move you to act in a way pleasing to this person. Maybe you send your friend a gift, or prepare his or her favorite meal. And when you tell those close to you about your friend's goodwill and generosity, they become appreciative and may even seek this person in their hour of need. This is how the circle of blessings and praise starts and spreads among people. As more people go through the same experience you went through, gratitude and virtue expand and grow. Similarly, Praising God increases his gifts and bounties as He affirms in the Quran:

Remember, your Lord proclaimed: "I shall give you more if you are grateful; but if you are ungrateful then surely My punishment is very great." (14:7)

So being thankful for a blessing grants you more blessings, and these in turn bring on more praise. If you take a moment to review your entire life, you will realize that every moment in it deserves gratitude. Even as you sleep, God's favors surround you as stated in this verse:

God gathers up the souls of those who die, and of those who do not die, in their sleep; then He keeps back those ordained for death, and sends the others back for an appointed term. Surely there are signs in this for those who reflect. (39:42)

When you get out of bed in the morning, God is the one who enables you to move. And without His favor, you would not be able to stand. When you eat your breakfast, God is the one who created this food for you and sustained you with it. And this merits praise and appreciation. When you head down the street to go to work, God enables you to reach your destination and subjects the means of transport for you. Whether you own a car, walk, or use public transportation, He is praiseworthy. Moreover, God is the one who has facilitated this job for you to gain livelihood, and feed your family through lawful means; which also merits

praise and gratitude. Then you return home to find your parents, your friends or your spouse and children, all immense gifts from Allah. In fact, every movement of your life warrants gratitude. That is why we should always commend our Lord even for the difficulties that we face, because what we consider hardship is, more often than not, good for us. God Almighty says:

You who believe, it is not lawful for you to inherit women against their will, nor should you treat your wives harshly, hoping to take back some of the bride-gift you gave them, unless they are guilty of something clearly outrageous. Live with them in accordance with what is fair and kind: if you dislike them, it may well be that you dislike something in which God has put much good.(4:19)

We praise our lord for His judgment as it always contains good, whether we like it or we disagree with it. By saying " الحمد لله "for whatever happens to you in life, you acknowledge that all matters belong to God; He brought you to life, and He is most aware of what is best for you.

The second verse in "The Opening" states: "All praise be to God Lord of the worlds". Have you wondered why God used the phrase "Lord of the worlds"? The answer is two-fold.

First, "Praise to God" means praise for his gifts of Divinity. These gifts are exclusive for those who recognize God as the one to be worshipped - in essence the believers-. The believers entrust the Lord with their way of life and adhere to the obligations of faith and the duties of worship. As a result, they enjoy the bounties of God's message and the fruits of adhering to his path in this world and the next. Keep in mind that God only assigns duties and obligations onto those who believe in him; He does not assign any duties to those who do not believe, rather, he only invites them to the join the faith.

Second, "Praise to God" is praise for his gifts of Lordship. These gifts are enjoyed by everyone. God has created all of us, and he provides for all of us regardless of our faith, and without any obligation. The sun rises on all mankind, animals and livestock serve everyone, and the earth yields crop for the believer and disbeliever alike. And while we all enjoy the bounties of lordship, the obligations that come with faith are difficult for some to accept. If people truly appreciated the value of God's instructions and guidance, they would have adhered to His message and enjoyed both his gifts of lordship and his gifts of divinity. We should praise the Lord for He has ordered what guarantees harmony and peace

in life for the benefit of everyone.

While the gifts of divinity come attached to duty and obligation in this world, their true and immense reward will be given free in the hereafter where God's reward and mercy is exclusive to the believers as mentioned in this verse:

Say, `Who has made unlawful God's beautiful things of adornment and elegance which He has produced for His servants and the delicious and pure things of His providing?' Say, `They are primarily meant for the believers -and for the disbelievers too- in this present life but exclusively for the believers on the Day of Resurrection.' In this way do We explain the Messages for a people who would know. (7:32)

So the believers praise God's for all his grants in this world and in the hereafter. God says in the Quran:

They will say, 'Praise be to God Who has fulfilled His promise to us and made us the inheritors of this land, letting us settle in the Garden wherever we want. How excellent is the wage of those who work!' (39:74)

And in another verse He describes the residents of paradise:

Their prayer in it will be, 'Glory be to You, God!' their greeting, 'Peace,' and the last part of their prayer, 'Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.' (10:10)

God wants all of us to feel assured that He is the Lord of all that is in the universe, so no power serving man can cease from providing its service. This is why you should not fear the future. And how can you fear it while Allah is the Lord of the worlds? If you are going through hardship, you remain confident that God will provide for you, because He is the Lord of the worlds. And if you encounter a crisis, your heart is content that God will reward you for your patience, and remove your distress because He is the Lord of the worlds. And if you are graced by a blessing, you thank God because He is the Lord of the worlds.

As you can see, God's favors surround us every minute of our lives regardless of our faith. He does not withhold his blessings and keeps everything in our service. Sadly, however, the universe itself, and all that is subjected in it to serve us is troubled by our wrongful deeds. When we use animals, plants, and even objects in actions that are displeasing to God, these creatures feel distress and anger towards mankind.

You can appreciate this, and more importantly, you can appreciate God's mercy when you listen to the following sacred narration. *God Almighty says: not a day passes by in which the sun rises, except that the sky calls out and says: Lord! Allow me to fall in pieces on the son of Adam for he has enjoyed Your bounties but showed ingratitude in return. And the oceans say: Lord! Grant us permission to drown the son of Adam for he has enjoyed your abundance but showed ingratitude in return. The mountains say: Lord! Allow us to clamp down on the son of Adam for he has enjoyed Your bounties and then showed ingratitude. God Almighty replies: leave them, let them be; if you had created them, you would have had mercy upon them. They are My servants; If they repent to me, I will be there for them with love. And if they do not repent, then I know what ails them and what cures them.*

God ensures the survival of everything that serves us in the universe despite our constant transgressions. Now, when you stand in prayer and recite "Lord of the worlds, the Most Merciful and the Most benevolent" you can appreciate its true meaning and benefit in the world around you.

Of course, you are probably wondering: Do the animals, plants, and inanimate objects actually speak? The answer is: yes, they speak a language that only their Creator understands as mentioned in the following verse describing the beginning of creation:

Then He turned to the sky, which was smoke—He said to it and the earth, 'Come into being, willingly or not,' and they said, 'We come willingly' (41:11)

Hence, the earth and the sky understood their Lord and replied: "We come willingly." Similarly, God taught Prophet Solomon (peace be upon Him) the language of the birds and the ants. And when Prophet David spent his nights praising God, the mountains used to exalt with him. In fact, every creation has a level of perception and even emotion that befits it. When God Almighty spoke of the people of the Pharaoh of Egypt He said:

How many gardens and fountains they left behind; And fields and stately mansions; and the bounties wherein they rejoiced; So it was. Yet We bequeathed these things to another people; Neither heaven nor earth shed any tears for them and they were granted no reprieve. (44:25-29)

As you can see, both the heavens and the earth have emotions… emotions that may reach the degree of weeping. And while they did not

weep over Pharaoh and his people, they do weep out of sadness when a true believer who adheres to God's path departs them in death. Ali ibn Abi Talib -the prophet's cousin- (may God be pleased with him) said: "When a believer dies two places weep over him, one on earth and another in the heavens. The place on earth where he used to pray weeps for him, and so does the place where his good deeds used to ascend to in Heaven."

verse 4

The Owner of the Day of Recompense.

If all of God's bounties warrant praise, then the bounty of {the Day of Recompense} deserves a greater praise; because if the Day of resurrection did not exist, then anyone who had filled the world with corruption would have escaped without being held accountable. And anyone who adhered to justice and deprived him or herself from various worldly enjoyments for God's pleasure would have worked in vein. By bestowing the Day of Judgment, God brought balance and justice to the entire existence. The fact that there will be an afterlife -in essence a day of reckoning- protects the rights of the weak and prevents the world from turning into a jungle where the strong endlessly attacks and tyrannizes the weak.

Have you noticed how the corrupt actions of a person are not limited to the victim of these actions? They actually affect the society as a whole. Even if you were not directly affected by the actions of a thief for example, you may start feeling unsafe when you hear about thefts in your neighborhood. Here, the verse ‘Owner of the Day of Recompense’ brings a sense of balance as you become aware that the hereafter is waiting those who have no regard for people's rights in society. No one will be able to escape that day regardless of his or her current power and

influence. Similarly, the integrity of a believer benefits the entire society. When a person fears God, respects everyone's rights, pardons and forgives, everyone that surrounds him or her benefits from this noble character and it's standing for truth and equality. The society as a whole becomes a better place.

This verse has two different recitals (مالك يوم الدين) and (ملك يوم الدين). They differ by only one vowel, and are both valid ways of reciting the Opening. These readings translate to "Owner of the day of resurrection" and "king of the day of resurrection" respectively. Let's take them one by one:

God describes himself in the Quran as the Owner of the Day of Recompense. The true owner of something is alone responsible for managing it. No one else has the right to interfere. I own my clothes, my car and my home. Therefore, I am the one responsible for these items, and I can do as I please with them.

The King of the Day of Recompense, on the other hand, implies that God will directly judge the affairs of the people that day with no interference from anyone. In this world, God may grant temporary rule and sovereignty over a kingdom to a person or a group of people, but in the hereafter the rule and command will be his alone as stated in this verse:

Say, 'O Allah, Master of all sovereignty! You give sovereignty to whomever You wish, and strip of sovereignty whomever You wish; You make mighty whomever You wish, and You abase whomever You wish; all good is in Your hand. Indeed You have power over all things. (Chapter 3: Verse 26)

Note that that God used the phrase (*strips* sovereignty) rather than (takes sovereignty) implying that no one in this world wants to willingly give up power. But it has to be forcefully withdrawn from him or her.

Here you may question: Doesn't rule and control at all time -in this world and the hereafter- belong to God? The answer is simply yes. However, God appoints some of His creation as successors and grants them authority on earth as He says in the Quran:

Have you thought of the man who argued with Abraham about his Lord because God had given him a kingdom? When Abraham said: "My Lord is the giver of life and death," he replied: "I am the giver of life and death." And Abraham said: "God makes the sun rise from the East; so you make it rise from the West," and dumbfounded was the infidel. God does not guide those who are

unjust. (2:258)

As you can see, true rule and sovereignty do not stem from the person who governs; rather they are the result of God's will. If rule had stemmed from one's self, then power would have remained with him or her forever without changing hands. Be always mindful that many people are put to the test through this type of grant. God will take rulers to account on the Day of Resurrection. How did they rule, and carry their conduct? What did they do with their power? More importantly, people who were ruled are also tested regarding their conduct. Did they remain silent about an unjust ruler? Did they prefer corruption? Or did they stand for the truth?

At first glance, you may get the impression that God is testing us so he would gain the knowledge of who is corrupt and who is upright. But this could not be further from the truth; God is our creator and he is all knowledgeable, all aware of his creation. Then, you may ask, why does he test us? He tests us so that we may bear witness against ourselves. No one can come on the Day of Resurrection and say: Lord, if only you had given me a chance, I would have followed the right path and implemented your guidelines.

To further clarify this point, let’s take an example from everyday life: Universities all over the world conduct exams for their students. Are the professors who taught these students all year unaware of what their students know? Do they intend to obtain this knowledge through the exam? Of course not! Every teacher can tell you who will Ace the test and who will fail well before the examination. Testing is important because it presents the evidence to the students themselves. If a student fails and then comes to argue, all the teacher has to do is point to the test result. On the other hand, if the exam was not conducted, then every student can claim that he or she deserves high grades and honors.

So if you choose to recite "Owner of the day of resurrection", you testify that God will run the affairs of that day as He desires without interference at any level. And if you recite "king of the day of resurrection", you testify that God will judge the affairs of his creations, even those who he had made kings and rulers temporarily in this world. God wants to reassure you that if you had been afflicted by a governor or king, a tyrant or a dictator, then a day will come where there will be no owner and no king but God himself.

Now, let's turn our attention to the word "day". Astronomically, a day begins from sun rise until the next sun rise. Linguistically, a “Day” is an adverb of time in which events take place. Since the adverb of time

cannot be owned, some scholars explain that the verse "Owner of the day of resurrection" means the owner of the affairs and events of that day, rather than the owner of the day itself. We reply that this is according to our abilities and understanding as humans because we cannot possess time. We are unable to bring back the past, nor bring on the future. But God Almighty is the Creator of time and He is not restricted by time or place. God Almighty states:

They will challenge you to hasten the punishment. God will not fail in His promise- a Day with your Lord is like a thousand years by your reckoning. (22:47)

and in another verse:

The angels and the Spirit ascend to Him in a day whose length is fifty thousand years. (70:4)

As you consider these two verses, you quickly recognize the intended meaning of the word ‘day’. God is the Creator of time, therefore, he is able create a day the duration of which is 24 hours, or a day the duration of which is a thousand, fifty thousand or a million years. We identify a single day as twenty four hours, and as day and night. But the fact is that day and night always exist on earth. As the earth rotates, every minute movement signals the end of a day in a region the beginning of one in another. Thus, if you view our planet a whole, you will realize that the day on earth never ends, neither does the night. Even on our own planet, the succession of days and nights is a relative phenomenon.

God is the creator of the day of resurrection, and He alone has the knowledge of its events, its heaven, hellfire and all creation that will be taken into account that day. God wants you to feel assured that if you were wronged in life, a day will come in which there will be no injustice.

Even in this world, if it were not for God's justice, people would have endlessly oppressed and transgressed over each other. But when the Hand of God strikes the tyrant, it makes him an example for others. And whoever escapes the torment of this world, despite his sin, will meet God in the hereafter so that He will take him into account. And this warrants praise. Once you have this certainty in your heart, any feelings of grief, bitterness or resentment that you may have because of the injustice around you are lessened.

Once, a person came to a righteous man and asked: I would like to know

whether I am amongst the people of this world or the people of the hereafter? The righteous man replied: God is most Merciful, thus He did not place peoples' fate and judgment in the hands of their akin. He placed the scale of each person is in his or her own hand. Your scale is in your hand, and you are most aware in which direction its balance is tipping. You may fool others with appearances, but you cannot cheat yourself. So, look inside and you will know whether you are from amongst the people of this world or the people of the hereafter.

The man asked: How can I do that? The righteous man replied with a question: Whose presences gives you more pleasure, the person who comes to give you money or the person who comes asking you for charity? The man remained silent. The righteous man continued: if you are happy when someone gives you money, then you are from amongst the people of this world. But if you are pleased when someone comes asking for charity, then you are from amongst the people of the hereafter. For man rejoices over whoever gives him what he likes. The person who gives you wealth is, in fact, giving you this world, and the person who takes charity from you, gives you the hereafter. If you want to be amongst the people of the hereafter then celebrate and seek those who invite you to charity and good work more than those who give you wealth.

The concept of 'the Owner of the Day of Resurrection' is an essential pillar of faith that cannot be overlooked. It means that the beginning and the end is from God. It means that we will all meet him, so we must prepare for that day by keeping God in mind in all our actions. In contrast, the disbeliever goes about his or her daily life carelessly without taking the final outcome into consideration as mentioned in the following verse:

As for those who disbelieve, their deeds are like a mirage in the desert which the thirsty takes for water till he reaches it to find that there was nothing, and finds God with him who settles his account, for God is swift at the reckoning. (Chapter 24:Verse 39)

This person has spent their entire life doing whatever he or she wants.....As long as there is no accountability, who will he or she fear? And for whom should he or she restrict their actions in this world? Religion is accountability! Similarly, if there had not been a day in which we will be taken to account then why do we pray, fast or give charity?

In fact the entire universe in all its movement is built on the basis of that day…..the day for which you and I must prepare. When God addresses

the believers in the Quran he refers to it as “the great attainment” because the true greatness of the hereafter is that it grants you an everlasting pleasure in paradise. It is the day which makes us tolerate that which we dislike, strive on God’s path, and spend our wealth to help the poor and the needy so that we may succeed. God also named it “the Day of Recompense”, because it is the time when every person will be held accountable for his faith. Did he or she act upon it, or waste it?

The hereafter also signifies God's justice as some people who transgressed and wronged others may have managed to escape from the punishment of this world. Would those also be able to escape God's justice? Of course not! They may have escaped the laws and sentences of humans, only to face God's punishment in the hereafter. Likewise, you must not think that it is good for you to get away with sin without consequences in life; rather it is to your detriment as you may have escaped from a limited punishment to an eternal one. Truly immense praise is due to God for he alone will judge us that day, for he is the most just and most generous.

Before we move on to the next verse, we should take time to explain the concept of 'vision'. There are two types of vision: The vision of sight (by the eye) and spiritual vision (by the heart). Let’s examine them one by one. Your vision -in essence your eyesight- is something tangible you experience first-hand through your senses and, as a result, it is irrelevant to belief. For example, you cannot say "I believe I can see you" if you can already see me. As long as you can see me, then this accounts for certainty, not belief. Spiritual vision, on the other hand, is when you believe in the unseen as though you can see it. This is a key element because spiritual vision, once attained through faith and insight, is more certain than the vision of the eye.

Umar ibn alKhattab, one of the prophet’s closest companions, said:

While we were one day sitting with the Prophet (Peace and blessings upon him), a man with very dark hair, dressed in the whitest of clothes came to us. None of us knew him, yet he had no trace of travel or hardship. He sat down close to the Prophet, placed his palms on his thighs and rested his knees against the prophet's knees, then said, "O Muhammad, Tell me about Islam." The messenger of God replied, "Islam is to testify that there is no deity but God and that Muhammad is His Messenger, that you should perform daily prayers, pay the alms, fast during the month of Ramadan, and perform pilgrimage to the Ka'bah in Mecca if you have the means to do so." the man replied, "You have spoken truly." We were amazed by this man questioning the prophet and

then telling him that he was right, but he went on to say, "Inform me about faith." The Prophet answered, "It is that you believe in God, His angels, His Books, His Messengers and in the day of judgment, and in fate -both in its good and evil aspects-" The man replied "You have spoken truly." Then he said, "Inform me about righteousness." The prophet answered, "Righteousness is that you should serve God as if you could see Him, for if you cannot see Him, rest assured that He sees you." The man asked, "Inform me about the day of resurrection." The Messenger of God answered, "I know no more about the hour of judgment than you do." The man then asked, "Well, inform me about the signs of the coming of the Day of Judgment." The prophet answered, "It is near when you see children treat their mother as a servant, and when you see the barefooted, naked, and destitute herdsmen competing with each other in raising lofty buildings." After that the man got up and left. The prophet turned to me and asked, "Umar, do you know who the questioner was?" I replied, "God and His Messenger know best." He said, "That was the angel Gabriel. He came to teach you your religion."

When the Prophet, peace be upon him, said regarding righteousness (It is that you should serve God as if you could see Him, for if you cannot see Him, know that He sees you.) he was referring to the manifestation of spiritual vision within the believer. When a person believes, he starts to see all his affairs through the prism of this spiritual enlightenment. For instance, when he recites a verse about paradise, he imagines the people of paradise in immense pleasure. And when he recites a verse regarding the people of hellfire, his body trembles as though he can see them in torment.

Verse 5

“You alone we worship, and you alone we ask for help”

Let’s expand on the concept of spiritual vision. One day the Prophet (peace be upon him) saw one of his companions named Harith bn Malik. He asked him: 'Harith, How are you?' Harith replied, 'I woke up with my heart filled with true faith.' He (peace be upon him) said, 'Harith! Reflect on what you say. What is the true essence of your faith?" Harith replied: "I have detached myself from the love of this world; I spend my nights up in worship, and my days in fasting. It is as if I can look up and see God's Divine Throne; and as if I can see the inhabitants of Paradise visit one another and the inhabitants of hellfire shout at one another.' The Prophet said, ' Harith, you have been enlightened with true knowledge. Now retain it firmly.'

In another example, God addresses the Prophet in the following verse:

Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephants? (Chapter 105: Verse 1)

Some critics cite this verse to challenge the authenticity of the Quran. Prophet Muhammad was born in the year of the battle of the elephant. God addressed him by using the phrase "didn't you see?", although the prophet, an infant at the time, could not have seen the incident. If God had used the phrase ‘Didn't you know?’ or 'Haven’t you heard?’ it would have made sense, as the prophet could have overheard the story. But The Lord used the phrase "Have you not seen?" instead. We reply that this is from amongst the elements of Islamic creed. To the believer, what God says is as true as one's own eyesight. The Quran is God's word and the verse "Have you not seen?" implies that this vision is continuous for every believer who recites the verse. With spiritual vision, man sees through his faith what his eyes fail to see.

Let's apply this concept to “The Opening”:

In grammar, there are three person pronouns, the first person, the second person and the third person pronouns. The first person (typically I or we) is the narrator of the story. The second person (you or yours for example) is present at the time of the narration, and the third person (typically he or her) is not present while we narrate about him or her. For example, when I say: "This is your pen", it means you are standing right in front of me. But when I say: "This is her pen", it implies that the pen's owner is not present at this time. Matters of faith are not based on what you observe; rather they are based on belief in that which is unseen.

In the first four verses of Al Fatiha, ‘God’ is unseen, ‘the Lord of the

Worlds' is unseen, 'the Most Merciful the Most Gracious' is unseen and 'the Owner of the Day of Recompense' is also unseen. Therefore, the grammar of the next verse requires the use of third person pronoun and should logically say: (He alone we worship, and from him alone we seek help). But God changed the context and used the second person pronoun. He said (You alone we worship, and from you alone we seek help.)This shows that the spiritual vision of the believer is as certain as what is in front of him or her at the present.

Now, when you recite these verses, you are in the presence of The Lord who blessed you with all the favors that surround you as He is the "Lord of the Worlds". You feel assured regarding His judgments because he is" the Most Merciful the Most Gracious". And if you do not hold gratitude in your heart for the bounties that He has given you, then beware of violating His commands because He is the "Owner of the day of Recompense". You have, in essence, and as you recite "The Opening" started to see the unseen through your spiritual vision. On the Day of Resurrection when God Almighty reveals himself with all his attributes of perfection, you will be transformed from the state of spiritual vision to the state of eyewitness vision.

The phrase "You alone we worship" indicates exclusiveness. For example, if I say "I will meet you" this may mean that I may meet with you alone, or with a crowd of people. But when I say "you alone I will meet", it means that the meeting is personal and exclusive.

Similarly, If the verse had read 'we worship you alone' it could mean that we worship you alone for now, but later on we may worship so and so. Thus, when we recite "You alone we worship" we acknowledge that God alone is worthy of worship, and no one can be coupled with him. God says in the Quran:

If there had been any gods besides Allah in heaven or earth, they would both be ruined. Glory be to Allah, Lord of the Throne, beyond what they describe! (21:22)

The word 'worship' means submission to God in all His commandments. Therefore, He made prayer the basis of worship, as the act of prostration during prayer reflects ultimate humility before God. During prostration, you place your face -the most beloved and noble part of your being- on the ground. You and I, the rich, the poor, the young and old are all equal in servitude to the extent that each expels pride and arrogance from his or her heart in front of all to see.

As you recite "The Opening" and say "All praise is due to God", you

recall all God’s favors that obligate praise. And when you say "Lord of the worlds", you recall the blessings of Lordship to all His creations causing the universe to serve humans; and when you recite "The Most Merciful, the Most Benevolent" you remember God's compassion and mercy that meets your sins with forgiveness when you repent. And when you read "The Owner of the Day of Recompense", it brings to mind the Day that you will stand before The Lord so he may reward you for your deeds. At that moment, having recalled all that obligates worship upon you, you recite **"You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help"**

Let’s take a moment to consider our goals and the means of achieving these goals. If you want to succeed in your exams, you must study. The thought of succeeding (which is your goal) was present in your mind first, and that motivated you to study. In another example, if you want to spend a weekend in New York City, you may start by buying a plane ticket. But the motive that made you leave your house, and go to the airport was your desire to travel to New York.

God created us so that we may worship Him as He clearly states in the following verse:

And I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship Me(51:56)

Therefore, worship is the reason and goal of creation. But ‘the goal first and actions second’ argument we highlighted earlier does not apply to God Almighty. The Lord is free of need. There is no cause, or goal, that rewards Him with benefit, or fulfills a desire. Goals and achievements, on the other hand, reward and motivate us. Worship actually pays the worshiper dividends and rewards him or her with vast benefits in this world and the hereafter. It is the goal that our creator has set for us so we can attain the highest degrees of success.

So, if you set your goal to be in line with God's guidance, and strive to attain worship at the highest level, you would have fulfilled your mission and reaped the greatest rewards of life. But what is the true meaning of worship? Does it mean sitting in a mosque in prayer and praise all day? Or is it a way of life that encompasses all your actions… in your house as you raise your family to be righteous, at your job as you strive for the betterment of life and to serve those around you? If God had intended only prayer and praise, He wouldn’t have given us freedom; rather He would have compelled us to worship Him like all His other creations as

stated in the following verse:

You may perhaps wear out your heart because they do not come to belief; If We wished We could send down a Sign to them from heaven, before which their heads would be bowed low in subjection(Chapter 26: Verses 3 and 4)

If God had wanted us to submit to Him by force, then no one would have the ability to deviate from His command. Actually, God gave us clues to his power of subjugation within our own bodies and through events that occur in our lives. For example, the human body is compelled to do certain tasks. The heart is compelled to beat and to stop as God wills. The stomach digests food, and the kidneys cleanse our blood while we are completely unaware. Likewise, every person is compelled by circumstances that befall his or her life. You cannot stop a sickness that might weaken or disable you, or a car that might crash into you, or many of the things that take place in the world which God has decreed.

In fact, the scope of freedom in your life is limited. You cannot control the day of your birth or who your parents are. You have no say regarding your looks, height or skin color. On the other hand, when it comes to matters of faith and action, God has given you all the freedom. He has compelled all His creations to worship Him except for humans and jinn because He wants them to turn to Him out of love.

So, if you make a choice to turn to your creator out of love, and if you choose to exercise your freedom according to his guidance, then you would avoid that which displeases Him, and do what He asks of you. At that moment you attain worship and became one of God's servants, not God's slaves. We are all slaves of God, in that we are all compelled to do certain things in life whether we choose to or not. But God's servants are those who willingly surrender their freedom of choice to God’s will. Every part of their lives, the parts which they have control over, and the parts that they do not, is according to God’s guidance. The Quran clearly differentiates between the two as stated in following verses:

When My servants ask you about Me, I am indeed nearmost. I answer the supplicant’s call when he calls Me. So let them respond to Me, and let them have faith in Me, so that they may fare rightly.(2:186)

And in another verse:

The servants of the All-beneficent are those who walk humbly on the earth, and when the ignorant address them, say, ‘Peace!(25:63)

God described the believers in the previous verse and called them servants. But when He addresses entire mankind He refers to them as slaves as the following verse illustrates:

That is on account of what you did. and your Lord is not tyrannical to the slaves. (3:182)

As you read the Quran you will come across one verse that seemingly deviates from this rule:

On the day when the unbelievers and whatever they had been worshipping besides God will be resurrected, He will ask the idols, "Did you mislead My servants or did they themselves go astray from the right path?(25:17)

This verse talks about the sinners and the misguided, yet it describes them as servants. The fact is that this verse relates to the hereafter, where all of mankind will be servants of God because on that Day everyone will be compelled to obey God in all aspects. Our freedom of choice ends at the time of death, and at that moment we all become servants of God.

Keep in mind that God does not ask anyone, except for the believers, to perform the mandates of faith and worship. Take a note of the following verses:

You who believe, fasting is prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be mindful of God. (2:183)

and in another:

O you who believe, deal with the difficulties of life with patience and prayers. Know that God is with the patient ones.(2:153)

The Lord only directs his commands to the believer who willingly turned to Him. More accurately, it is the believer who obligates him or herself to God's mandate. When you declare your faith, and entrust The Lord with all your affairs, you enter into the theistic contract with God, and oblige yourself to follow his path.

Here we should take a moment to recognize the high honor and status that prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) attained with the Lord. The prophet perfected worship and mindfulness in all aspects of his life as God desires of all of us. And when you recall that worship is the reason for creation, you realize that Prophet Muhammad embodied humanity's potential, and you understand why the Prophet attained the

highest status and honor in the sight of our creator.

God wants to relieve you from the humiliation of need in this world. In the verse "You alone we worship and from you alone we seek help", God paired between His worship and seeking help from him. Because when you seek support from anyone besides him, you are relying on someone who is limited by human nature regardless of his or her current power and affluence. We live in a world where circumstances change in a matter of moments. The powerful can lose power in a day, and wealth vanishes in minutes. More importantly, always remember that the person you are seeking help and support from can be overtaken by death at anytime. The only way you can rise above this uncertainty is to seek help from The All-Living who does not die, the All-Powerful who does not weaken, and the all knowing who has your best interest first and foremost. That is how you can attain honor and strength when you seek help from God.

Sadly, more often than not, people gain power and influence by exploiting and transgressing over the rights of others. This often puts the believer in conflict with those who hold power. In this struggle between right and wrong, where the odds look stacked high against the believer, God wants you to seek him so he can be your protector and your pillar of support.

Please do not misunderstand relying on God and seeking his help with laziness and inaction. On the contrary, it means that you should always do you best and exhaust all means available to you. But if all fails, you do not despair, because you have faith in your heart that The Lord is always there supporting you and rewarding you for your patience and effort.

Verses 6 and 7

Guide us to the straight path.

The path of those whom You have blessed, not the way of those who earned Your anger, nor of those who went astray.

As you recite "The Opening", you bring to mind God's gift of guidance, blessings of Lordship, and abundant mercy. You declare that there is no God besides Him; you do not associate anything with Him in worship and you rely on him in all your affairs. Thus you become from amongst God's servants. At that moment, God reaches out to you and teaches you one of the finest supplications a believer can learn. And as long as you remain in His company, He will respond to you, and answer your prayers as promised in the following verse:

When My servants ask you about Me, I am indeed nearmost. I answer the supplicant's call when he calls Me. So let them respond to Me, and let them have faith in Me, so that they may fare rightly.(Chapter 2: Verse 186)

Given this golden opportunity, what do you ask God for? Would you ask for something temporary, or is this your chance to ask for everlasting good? A true believer does not ask God to grant him abundant wealth, property or a nice car for example; because these material things are short-lived. God teaches us that true life is in the Hereafter; therefore, he wants us to supplicate for guidance to the straight path; the path that will protect us from hellfire and admit us into the everlasting life and bliss of paradise.

There are two types of Guidance: first there is God's general guidance, and second there is His divine guidance. General guidance is universal for entire mankind. More specifically, God calls everyone to the right path; He sends prophets and messengers and supports them with miracles and scripture to deliver his message to everyone. God clarifies the outcome of following His path and that of abandoning it. Sowhoever wants to follow the right path can do so, and whoever chooses to abandon it can do so. Sadly, despite God's guidance, many people who receive God's message choose to take a different route. Let's take an example from the Quran:

As for the tribe of Thamud: We showed them the straight path of guidance but they preferred blindness over guidance. So then the lightning-like punishment of humiliation seized them because of what they had been earning for themselves. (41:17)

These were people who, through the freedom of choice that God granted them, did not follow the straight path. But how about those who do follow it….what kind of support do they get? The Lord supports them with his divine guidance; he endears faith and piety to their hearts, and facilitates for them the actions that lead to paradise. God protects them from evil, and helps them through hardship. This divine guidance is specific for the believers as the Quran states:

As for those who follow true guidance, He leads them far ahead in their right ways and grants them piety and restraints from evil suited to their condition. (47:17)

The difference between God's general guidance to all mankind and his divine guidance to the believers is like the difference between having a map, and having someone with you showing you the best way turn by turn. Whoever pursues the path of righteousness receives God's support in all aspects of his or her life. On the other hand, God abandons those who distance themselves from his path and leaves them astray as mentioned in the following verse:

Whoever turns a blind eye to the remembrance of the All-beneficent, We assign him a devil who remains his companion. (43:36)

As you study the Quran further, you will find three types of people who are deprived from God's divine guidance. They are listed in the following verses:

That is because they preferred the worldly life over the Hereafter and that God does not guide the disbelieving people. (16:107)

And in another verse:

that will make it more likely they will give true and proper testimony, or fear that their oaths might be refuted by others afterwards. Be mindful of God and listen; God does not guide those who are corrupt (5:108)

And lastly,

Did you not see him who argued with Abraham concerning his Lord, as Allah had given him the kingdom? When Abraham said, "My

Lord is He who gives life and causes death", he answered, "I give life and cause death"; Abraham said, "So indeed it is Allah Who brings the sun from the East - you bring it from the West!" - the disbeliever was therefore baffled; and Allah does not guide the unjust. (2:258)

So, the disbelievers, the corrupt and the unjust are the ones who are expelled from God's divine guidance on the straight path.

Now, let's take a closer look at the meaning of "the straight path". A path usually leads to a goal or a destination. When you plan a trip to your favorite vacation spot, you would naturally want to get there as soon as possible, so you choose the shortest road with no detours. As you well know, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line; it is -by definition- free from all curves and twists, because even a small curve can deviate you a great distance from your goal. Take for example a train track. When a train shifts from one destination to another, it does not veer off greatly all of a sudden; rather the track is shifted by only a few millimeters. At first this shift appears very small, but the more you travel on the track, the more apparent the difference becomes. In fact, as the train travels, that tiny shift widens to the extent that the train ends up at an entirely new city hundreds of miles away. Similarly, God has mapped for us the shortest route that leads to paradise. And any deviation from the straight path, regardless of how slight it may be, distances you from your goal. We ask God to guide us, and keep us on the straight path that leads directly to heaven.

Now, let's continue with the last verse that states 'the path of those whom You have blessed, not the way of those who earned Your anger, nor of those who went astray'. Who are the people who have been blessed by God? We find the answer in the following verse:

Whoever obeys God and the Messenger will be among those He has blessed: the messengers, the truthful, those who bear witness to the truth, and the righteous- what excellent companions these are (4:69)

Meaning that as you recite 'The Opening', you supplicate God to guide you to the same path they took so you can join this great company at the highest levels in heaven. God assures you that in response, he will grant you the pleasure of the hereafter as He states in the following sacred narration: "*When my servant says: 'Guide us to the straight path', He Almighty replies: 'This is for my servant, and my servant shall have what he has asked for.'*"

Take a moment to think about all the luxuries and pleasures in our world…..the fancy hotels you want to stay in, the fine restaurants you would like to eat at, the beach resorts and spas you would love to visit, the designer clothes, luxury and sport cars and so on. All these items and experiences are the work of humans, and they are limited by our capabilities and imagination. Now compare that to the pleasures and luxuries that God Almighty, who is limitless in his knowledge and capability, has prepared for you in Paradise. Everything pales in comparison. God says describing the heavens:

There they will have whatever they wish, and with Us there is yet more (50:35)

In paradise, not only will you find what you desire the instance it crosses your mind, but the Lord will also furnish you with unexpected pleasures that you have not known, or even thought of before. All of this…..all the descriptions of paradise in the Quran are only a metaphor, so that you may picture the pleasures of the hereafter in your mind. In reality, heaven contains that which *no eye has seen*, no *ear has heard*and no man *has*ever imagined.

An idea or a concept must exist in one's mind first in order to express it through words. For example we did not know the name of the television, or the mobile phone until it was invented and introduced. Similarly, there aren't any words in any human language that express the pleasures of paradise because *no eye has seen these pleasures*, and no mind *has* conceived them. Therefore, everything we recite in the Quran only approximates the luxuries of paradise and does not provide us with true details as mentioned in the following verse:

A likeness of Paradise which the God-revering, pious are promised is this: in it are rivers of water incorruptible; and rivers of milk whose taste never changes; and rivers of wine delicious for the drinkers; and rivers of pure, clear honey. And in it there are also fruits of every kind for them, as well as forgiveness from their Lord. Are those who will enjoy all this like the ones who will abide in the Fire and be given boiling water to drink, so that it rends their bowels? (Chapter 47: Verse 15)

As you can see, this not the actuality of paradise, it is only a resemblance so our minds can perceive it.

In "The Opening", we begin our supplication in verse six by asking God to guide us to paradise. Then we appeal to Him to protect us from falling

from his path and to help us stay away from those who have angered him. We recite: ‘Guide us to the straight path, the path of those whom You have blessed, Not the way of those who earned Your anger, nor those who went astray’.

How does one earn God’s anger? You may ask. It is through constant and repeated transgression and wrongdoing despite receiving God’s guidance. An example is given in the following verse:

Say: Shall I point out something to you much worse than this, judging by the treatment it received from God? Those who received the curse from God and His anger, those of whom some He transformed into apes and swine, those who worshipped Evil and false gods— These are worse in rank, and far more astray from the even Path (5:60)

This verse refers to a tribe from the Israelites around the time of Prophet David. They had received God’s message and believed in it. However, they earned His anger by repeatedly devouring people’s rights and altering the scriptures in order to obtain temporary wealth and power.

The last part of our supplication in ‘The Opening’ states: (nor of those who went astray). This phrase alludes to two types of people: those who lost their way, and those who mislead others.

The person who loses his or her way acts and indulges without taking the hereafter into account. The words 'astray' or 'lost' are typically associated with a road, meaning a person who goes on a journey while not knowing or losing track of the destination. As for the one who misleads others, he or she is not content by abandoning God’s path, rather this person strives to tempt and drag others in the wrong direction as well. All sinners will come on the Day of Resurrection burdened with their own sins, except for the misleaders; they will come bearing their sins and the sins of those whom they led astray as the mentioned in the following verse:

Hence, they will bear their own burdens in full on the Day of Resurrection and some of the burdens of those whom they, being ignorant, caused to go astray. Look now! How evil is the burden they load upon themselves (16:25)

Note that in "The Opening",you ask for God’s protection from being amongst those who went astray, but you do not explicitly mention the word (misleaders). This is because a person must be astray first in order to become a misleader. Hence, seeking God’s protection from misguidance protects you from both: being astray and from misleading

others.

Now, as we come to the conclusion of this chapter, we follow Prophet Muhammad’s example. He was taught by the Angel Gabriel to say “Amen” after reciting "The opening". Keep in mind that "Amen" is from the words of Gabriel to the Messenger, not from the words of the Quran. It means "Lord, Accept our supplication when we said ‘Guide us to the straight path. The path of those whom You have blessed’. This is because our need for guidance and protection does not end by asking for them; rather we also need to ask for acceptance of our supplication. The word ‘Amen’ fulfills this need.

The same applies during congregation prayers. When the leader of the prayers (also known as Imam) finishes reciting "The Opening", we say "Amen" because the supplication the imam recited in the last two verses also applies to all those who follow him in prayer. When Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) supplicated the Lord to destroy the wealth of the people of Pharaoh, God Almighty replied in the following verse:

God said: The prayer of you both has indeed been accepted, therefore continue in the right way and do not follow the path of those who do not know. (10:89)

Note that, while Prophet Moses was the one who supplicated, God addressed both Prophets Moses and Aaron (peace be upon them) in response. This is because, prophet Aaron followed his brother’s supplication by saying ‘Amen’, and thus he became one of the supplicants.